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28 April 1983

MEMORANDUM FOR: NIO/NESA

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FROM:

C/PAB/NESA

SUBJECT: Wall Street Journal article of 26 April 83 on
Afghanistan

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1. We agree that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan has grave strategic implications for US interests in South Asia and the Persian Gulf region because it gives Moscow a base from which further to threaten Iran and Pakistan. Contrary to the Wall Street Journal article, however, Shindand Airbase in Afghanistan does not at present give the Soviets a base to project air power deep into the Middle East (except eastern Iran). Our analysis shows that Soviet tactical aircraft--including the SU-24 Fencer light bomber--cannot reach Persian Gulf targets (or Tehran) from Shindand flying mission profiles that anticipate air defense opposition. Even flying optimum mission profiles that assume no opposition, only the Fencer has the capability to reach those targets. Soviet bombers--including Backfire--would not need a base in Afghanistan to threaten the Persian Gulf region.

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2. Since the Soviet invasion in December 1979, the Soviets have constructed new helicopter pads and support facilities and increased the fuel and munitions storage depots at Shindand to enhance air capabilities against the insurgents as they have at all of their other major airbases in Afghanistan. The runway has not been lengthened.

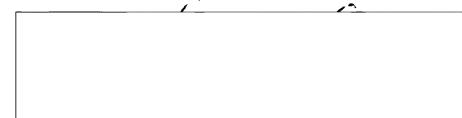
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there are only 10,000 Soviet troops (vice 30,000) and about 20 helicopters (vice 200) based at Shindand. The Soviets also have 12 MIG-21 fighters and 12 SU-25 attack aircraft at Shindand.

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3. Attached is a perspective on the potential Soviet air threat to the Persian Gulf region from Afghanistan. We believe its conclusions are still valid: airbases in Afghanistan do not at present enhance Soviet capabilities to attack the Persian Gulf, but the introduction of newer, longer-range tactical aircraft in the Soviet Air Force or of an aerial refueling capability for tactical aircraft by the late 1980s would significantly increase the threat.

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Attachment as stated

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NGA Review Completed

[Redacted]
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DDI/NESA/SO/P [Redacted]

(27 April 83)

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PERSPECTIVE

USSR-AFGHANISTAN: POTENTIAL FOR AIR THREAT TO THE PERSIAN GULF

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Soviet military activities in Afghanistan are currently aimed against the insurgency, but the construction of a new airfield significantly closer to the Persian Gulf in southwestern Afghanistan would indicate an ominous shift in Moscow's focus. The Persian Gulf is now beyond the effective range of Soviet tactical aircraft operating from existing airbases in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, a new airfield in southwestern Afghanistan would not bring most Soviet tactical aircraft within operational range of Persian Gulf targets.

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Air Coverage From Existing Bases

The only airbases in western and southern Afghanistan capable of supporting tactical air operations are at Herat, Shindand, and Qandahar.

[redacted] Soviet fighters and fighter-bombers are based at Shindand and Qandahar, but they do not have the range to attack targets in the Persian Gulf region from there. The other airfields in western and southern Afghanistan cannot support tactical air operations because they have neither sufficient runways nor logistic support facilities.

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Air Coverage From A New Airfield

A new airfield in southwestern Afghanistan would increase Soviet tactical air coverage of southwestern Iran, but we judge it would give the Soviets few advantages in attacking targets in the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, or the Arabian Peninsula. We believe that Soviet military planners would anticipate possible opposition to an attack in the Persian Gulf from US carrier-based aircraft in the region or from Iran and the Gulf Arab states. Soviet fighters and fighter-bombers flying great distances at low altitudes to avoid early detection and to limit the response times of opposing air forces--particularly from US carrier-based aircraft--could not reach Persian Gulf targets even from southwestern Afghanistan, according to the Intelligence Community's estimates of Soviet aircraft performance. The SU-24 Fencer light bomber, a longer-range aircraft, could reach Persian Gulf targets but would be operating at the extreme limits of its capabilities when flying a mission profile which anticipates opposition. Soviet medium bombers, including Backfire and Badger, would not require airbases in Afghanistan to be within range of the Persian Gulf, but could be based in the USSR.

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The combat radius of any aircraft varies according to the speeds and altitudes at which it flies to and from the target, its time in the target area, and the tactics used in performance of the mission. Combat missions flown long distances at low altitudes to increase the probability of success and minimize losses significantly degrade the maximum range of the aircraft at high altitudes. The combat radius of an aircraft in any particular mission will most depend on how much of the mission is flown at low altitudes. Soviet tactical aircraft based in southwestern Afghanistan, therefore, could fly farther than the low-altitude coverage depicted on the map depending on Moscow's perception of the threat from opposing air defenses. Nonetheless, we judge that Soviet fighters and fighter-bombers cannot reach Persian Gulf targets, or will be operating at the extreme limits of their maximum combat radius, even if they fly optimum mission profiles from a base in southwestern Afghanistan.

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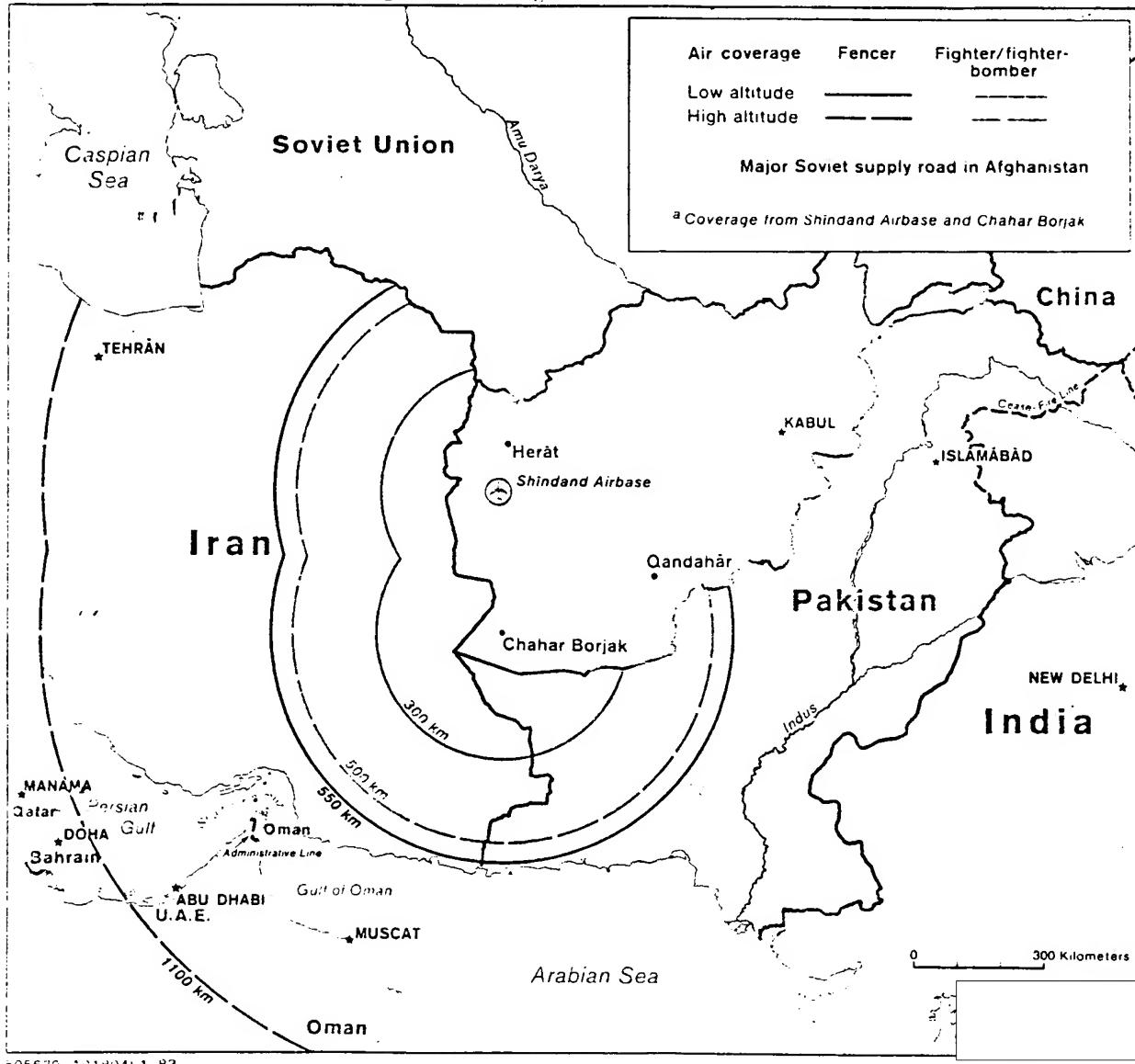
Potential for New Airfield Construction

[redacted] the Soviets are expanding and improving existing airfields throughout Afghanistan, but are not building a new

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1 February 1983
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ZCX7Potential Soviet Air Coverage From Afghanistan^a

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1 February 1983
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airfield in the southwest as reported in the Western press. [redacted] since the invasion the Soviets have built additional helicopter parking hardstands and fighter revetments, have improved maintenance facilities, and have increased fuel and munitions storage capacities at airfields throughout Afghanistan. Much of this construction has been completed, but improvements continue to be made. We believe that the airfield improvements that are being made in Afghanistan are clearly intended to enhance Soviet capabilities against the insurgents by increasing the number of helicopters that can be supported in the country and expanding the maintenance capabilities of Soviet and Afghan air units. [redacted]

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The construction of a major airbase in southwestern Afghanistan would be costly, time-consuming, and confront nearly insurmountable logistical difficulties. [redacted] the construction of new airbases in the USSR that are capable of sustained support for tactical air units typically requires a minimum of three years. Moreover, Soviet airbases are typically located along major lines of communication including railroads. There is virtually no logistical infrastructure in southwestern Afghanistan to support building a new airbase. The Soviets would need to build a road capable of supporting sustained traffic by heavy vehicles and equipment in order to transport the necessary building materials, particularly the large concrete slabs used for runway construction. The distance from the major Soviet supply line connecting Herat, Shindand, and Qandahar with the USSR to the southwestern corner of Afghanistan is over 100 miles on primitive, or nonexistent, roads. [redacted]

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The Afghan insurgents would likely be able to harass, but not prevent the construction and operation of an airfield in southwestern Afghanistan. The Soviets, however, would need to assign several ground force battalions in the area to suppress insurgent activity and defend the airfield. Additional forces would be required to protect the new road that would need to be built to support airfield construction in southwestern Afghanistan. [redacted]

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Outlook

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan clearly has serious strategic implications for the area and gives Moscow a potential base from which to further threaten Iran and Pakistan. The construction of a new airfield in southwestern Afghanistan would indicate Moscow's intention to enhance its strategic presence in the Persian Gulf region. The introduction of new tactical aircraft with greater range at low altitudes in the late 1980s, or the development of an aerial refueling capability for Soviet aircraft, would allow the Soviets to more directly threaten the Persian Gulf region from a base in southwestern Afghanistan than is currently possible. We judge, however, that the Soviets would not build a new airfield there until the Afghan insurgency was effectively controlled--an unlikely development in at least the next few years unless the Soviets are willing to bear the substantial military, economic, and political costs of massive reinforcement. [redacted]

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